

Book Review

Priority! The Dating of Scientific Names in Ornithology. A Directory to the Literature and its Reviewers. Compiled by Edward C. Dickinson, Leslie K. Overstreet, Robert J. Dowsett and Murray D. Bruce 320 pp. + CD ROM with over 160 pp of tables. 28 greyscale illustrations. Aves Press. 2011. ISBN 978-0-9568611-1-5.

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Before I review an ostensibly ornithological work, I should confess to being an entomologist, working on beetles; however this is a work that extends well beyond the one field, following in the tradition of the great archivist Charles Davies Sherborn (on the 150th anniversary of whose birth it was published). I expect I was asked to review it because I am known to have frequently expressed a belief in the importance of the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature, a belief that is also a guiding principle of this book; I also note that two other entomologists, Neal Evenhuis and Pat Bouchard, have also reviewed it and their quotes appear on the back cover. There are of course profound differences between birds and beetles, in terms of the relationship between the group and its taxonomic community. Beetles, with the exception of certain families, have suffered from insufficient descriptive attention. Even though an estimated 400,000 species have been formally named, most appear to have been named only once, and thousands more, no doubt, have no name at all. Birds tell a different story- their popularity has made them one of the best known of all animal groups, but has also led to a shocking amount of 'over description'. The introduction to '*Priority!*' explains that the 9723 bird species share an astonishing 100,000+ species group names. Even though these include 26,400 accepted subspecies (whatever those are worth) that still leaves multiple names per valid taxon. Add to this some 10,000 generic group names (yes, more than the number of valid species!) and the importance of determining priority in ornithology becomes very apparent. While many would define priority as an objective way of selecting between synonyms, it is interesting that this book's abstract discusses it in terms of identifying the 'winners'. That concept really brings home the competitive nature of vertebrate taxonomy, which has been, and in some vertebrate groups still is, the cause of much of the kind of problem the book seeks to address. The race to be the first into print has, historically, led to synonymy and homonymy through inadequate checking of previous literature, and to 'quick and dirty' publication, even new birds described in *The Daily Mail* and *American Exchange and Mart*. If all of this were not bad enough, the introduction discusses that many ornithologists regard dates for names to be of 'trivial importance' (and indeed one often sees published lists of bird names that omit not just the date but sometimes even the author); others rely on vernacular names, even though these lack the universality and stability of scientific names. It is no coincidence that Edward Dickinson, the book's first author, is also the managing editor of the '*Howard and Moore Complete Checklist of Birds of the World*', and no doubt many of the problems that '*Priority!*' deals with came to light during the preparation of the 2003 edition of that work.

The authors of 'Priority!' estimate that of all the publications featuring avian nomenclatural acts, some 4–6% present dating difficulties. The purpose of the book is to clarify the dating of those problematic publications and to provide a new and unambiguous source of reference for those dates to prevent future confusion. It is the kind of nomenclatural spadework that underpins taxonomy and most of the other biological sciences, but which is too often taken for granted. The product of several years of dedicated scholarship by a very skilled team including ornithologists and librarians, it has drawn on the assistance of a huge list of scientists, archivists, bibliographers and institutions, and represents a major step towards cleaning up many of the problems of dating avian names, and hence, as the title suggests, discovering which of the plethora of synonyms should be used. The first 60 pages, dealing with the Code (discussing and elucidating specific articles), and with the historical background of printing and publishing, and how to date publications, are of considerable general interest to all zoologists. These are followed by almost 200 pages of alphabetical lists of problematic publications, with discussion of, and in many cases solutions to, the associated problems. It has an extensive reference list, a good glossary, and a number of indices, as well as a CD ROM containing over 160 pages of searchable tables of supplementary data.

Many of the problematic publications resolved here also deal with taxonomic groups other than birds, increasing the book's breadth of usefulness. The authors also mention that its preparation resulted in 27 related publications, and several of the contributors have launched a new journal 'Zoological Bibliography' that deals with the same subject. I feel that, with the modern information tools and bibliographic and archival sources, now is the time to be cleaning up the nomenclatural messes of the past, and the entire zoological community, whether they know it or not, owes a debt of gratitude to those who are doing it. I think that this book belongs on the shelf of anyone with an interest in nomenclature or historical bibliography.

Corrigendum

In a recent comment by Morris and Barclay (BZN 68: 292) a third author was erroneously included. His contribution was in fact a separate comment on the same subject, which is given on p. 293 of BZN 68. His inclusion on the earlier comment was the result of a printer's error. The correct citation of the comment is: 'Morris, M.G. and Barclay, M.V.L. Comment on the proposed precedence of *Maculinea* van Eecke, 1915 over *Phengaris* Doherty, 1891 (Lepidoptera, LYCAENIDAE) (Case 3508) 1. BZN 68: 292–293'.